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SUBJECT: CHIAYI MAYORAL RACE HEATS UP IN LAST WEEK

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1. (SBU) Summary: In a mayoral race touted by the press and southern political observers as one of the most important for the DPP during the 3 in 1 elections, nervous campaigners on both sides in Chiayi City have turned to negative campaigning and vote buying to lure the 30 percent of critical undecided voters. President Chen leads the mud-slinging for 3 days in the pan-green camp in an attempt to spur a crisis mentality among the depressed deep-green voters. Despite signs that the KMT candidate has a substantial lead, the KMT cannot rest easy in this deep Green heartland. End summary.

2. (SBU) For DPP operatives in Chiayi City the mayoral election finally have moved into their comfort zone -- the high tension, big stakes, last few days of campaigning in what appears to many outsiders to be an unwinnable race for the DPP. Although they previously worried that local appearances by President Chen could poison their candidate's chances, the DPP has now fallen back on what they know best: creating a crisis to which DPP voters can respond. Their new campaign slogan, repeated as a daily mantra, is that a win for the KMT in Chiayi City will return Taiwan to the hands of mainland China. The purpose of this negative image, DPP campaigners told AIT/K, is to motivate the depressed "deep green" voters, who are unlikely to vote if they don't feel the island is under mortal threat. They estimate if they can spur even five percent out of their lethargy and into voting booths on December 3, then the election is theirs. With an election turnout at 65 percent, they speculate, the DPP is likely to win. If the turnout is more than 70 percent, they say they can claim a sure victory.

3. (SBU) Circumspect KMT officials in Chiayi City revealed their own polls that show KMT candidate Huang Min-hui 15 percent ahead of DPP candidate incumbent mayor Chen Li-zhen. The KMT claims the DPP is overly optimistic if they believe their polls showing Mayor Chen just three points behind Huang. DPP officials told AIT/K that polls are meaningless because the DPP is always behind in polls, but they always win elections. It is exactly this history of DPP success that keeps KMT officials nervous. Despite all the polls and word of mouth that place Huang in the lead, both KMT and DPP officials believe that a DPP win still is possible.

4. (SBU) DPP officials who previously hoped the scandal-ridden President Chen would skip Chiayi City are now comfortable with his 3 day presence (November 28, 29 and December 1) and his message because the tone and timing are just right to communicate a crisis. Chiayi City political observers note that incumbent mayor Chen is known widely as less than a stellar campaigner and desperately needs the President's help at this point. She does not like negative campaigning and her less than amiable persona has made it doubly hard for the DPP to package her against such a seasoned and likeable campaigner like the KMT's Huang. President Chen's willingness to raise his voice, denounce the KMT for its past and present, and threaten the voters with the potential loss of the island is just what Chiayi City deep-green voters need, say DPP campaigners, to get the deep-green base out to vote. Interestingly, these deep-green voters are not staying home just because they are disillusioned by recent DPP scandals. More importantly, one of the beleaguered deep-green independence leaders told AIT/K, they have been "heart-stricken" because President Chen's administration has not moved forward on promises of Taiwan independence. They perceive there is no one left to vote for who will move their agenda any closer to reality.

5. (SBU) Although KMT campaigners in Chiayi City couldn't say if Chairman Ma Ying-jeou will be down to stand beside candidate Huang in the last days leading up to the election, they did stress that being the "opposition party" in Chiayi City offers them some extra votes. While most people see Chiayi City as the cradle of Taiwan's democracy, they noted, it's really a "cradle of opposition," in which challenging authority is a

local attitude. Even without a visit by Chairman Ma, they are hoping to turn that sentiment to their advantage by pounding on the DPP's failure to deliver as a ruling party. However, their candidate, who is running on her own merit rather than as a KMT party faithful, is leaving the negative campaign messages to her campaign officials. Instead she is using her campaign hours to work her exceptionally strong grassroots base of voters who not only devotedly enjoy her time with them, but trust her effectiveness since she has been delivering excellent services to constituents as a legislative yuan member.

16. (SBU) AIT/K heard accusations of massive vote-buying from both sides in this mayoral race. The only thing they two sides had in common was the price of a vote, which is going at NT 3,000 for a "party slate" vote in which the seller agrees to vote for party candidates in the mayoral and city council elections. One TSU-aligned political observer told AIT/K a voter would have to hide this week to avoid being approached by a "good friend" to secure his/her vote. Although vote buyers, claimed this interlocutor, expect delivery on only 30 percent of purchases, that 30 percent is critical in an election this close. Besides, he said, "it comforts the candidates" to know that, if nothing else, there is a 30 percent cushion out there to shore them up.

17. (SBU) Comment: There is no question that the Chiayi City's DPP has come back to life in the last few days before the election. While there is no guarantee the negative message they are pushing will mobilize traumatized deep-green voters, DPP campaigners express confidence they still can beat the KMT here in the heartland of the party. The planned three day visit of the President indicates just how nervous the DPP is about the significant damage a KMT win in Chiayi City could visit on its future prospects in Southern Taiwan. End comment.

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